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Innovation and Responsibility: Librarians in an Era of Generative AI, Inequality, and Information Overload

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Acknowledgements

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Innovation and Responsibility: Librarians in an Era of Generative AI, Inequality, and Information Overload

Abstract

In an era marked by generative AI, widening inequality, and information overload, librarians with LIS training find themselves at the forefront of a changing landscape. The traditional paradigm in academia is challenged by new technologies and social shifts, prompting a reassessment the librarian's role as a public leader. This article discusses three perspectives on these issues, placing them within the larger conversation of the LIS field. Dr. Norman Mooradian lays the groundwork for a paradigm shift by exploring the intersection of knowledge and ethics in a knowledge economy. Boheme Morris delves into the complexities of inequality within the high-tech knowledge economy, challenging the efficacy of the "access doctrine." Sarah Wilson's research emphasizes the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion in knowledge access, and sounds a clarion call for library services to do more in the furtherance of DEI.

Keywords

Librarians, LIS professionals, information age, knowledge, misinformation, online searches, perceived veracity, information literacy, generative AI, legal frameworks, ethical responsibilities, AI ethics, technology, social good, SRJ, Student Research Journal, open access, peer-reviewed, information access, DEI, Inclusion, equity, ethical technology.

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About Author

Odin Hartshorn Halvorson is a writer, unenlightened generalist, and librarian. A current MLIS student at San Jose State University, Odin is also a graduate from the Stonecoast MFA program. An inveterate scholar, his research has been twice featured at the International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts (ICFA). His fiction and nonfiction work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared online and in print in venues such as The Strand and Analog Science Fiction and Fact. He also co-founded founded [Round Table Writers](#), an organization dedicated to "writers helping writers". Odin is an itinerant volunteer with organizations like Socrates Cafe, [EveryLibrary](#), and the Surrey International Writing Conference.

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Librarians, and all those with LIS training, hold an increasingly complex (and vital) role within a modern economy of knowledge that crosses borders, defines global agendas, and sets the stage for the world that might be. As we take raw data and turn it into understandable information, it becomes important to consider how to use and apply that information. Data turned to information becomes the groundwork for knowledge that can lead to change.

And the world is changing, taking academia, that most stalwart and intractable of entities, along for the ride (Vostal, 2016; Babalola et al., 2019). Academia is commonly seen as stuffy, elitist, and removed from the day-to-day necessities of ordinary folk. In its *Information Literacy Framework*, the Association of College and Research Libraries conceptualizes scholarship as a conversation (2015). This conversation is open to anyone, from any background or level of training, and yet, “While novice learners and experts at all levels can take part in the conversation, established power and authority structures may influence their ability to participate and can privilege certain voices and information” (Information Literacy Framework, 2015).

LIS professionals are powerful gatekeepers of information and knowledge, making it our responsibility to self-assess and work to remove the barriers of privilege whenever possible. While we should acknowledge the forebearers of the scholarly conversation, we must simultaneously seek out gaps in that conversation from which to launch new inquiries. It is more important than ever to take careful stock of *how* we enter and take part in that conversation, and of who doesn't have a voice in it at all.

As Thomas Kuhn pointed out in his famous essay, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, science operates within the “paradigm,” or mainstream conversation, of its time (1996). A paradigm in science is made up of all the data, information, and knowledge that is available at that time. And it is especially that which a consensus of voices within the conversation at that time has agreed is *currently relevant*. And yet, that which is considered relevant, or worthy of inclusion in the conversation, changes over time. Progress is not mere hierarchical growth from lesser states of knowledge to greater, but, in truth, “the successive transition from one paradigm to another via revolution” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 12).

The conversation in this issue

In Volume 13, Issue 2 of *The Student Research Journal (SRJ)*, Dr. Norman Mooradian, Boheme Morris, and Sarah Wilson all take up this task of widening the conversation, of altering the established paradigm within and around LIS.

Mooradian lays the groundwork for just such a paradigm shift in *Knowledge Ethics: Conceptual Preliminaries*, by charting the “intersection of the key concepts of knowledge and ethics” (Mooradian, 2024, p. 1). Mooradian’s work explores ethics within a “knowledge economy,” where imagination and information, not muscle and machines, drive society. This shift to intangible assets like skills and intellectual property can bring prosperity but also contains challenges like digital class divides and other forms of inequality.

Inequality is center stage in Boheme Morris’s deft review of *The Promise of Access: Technology, Inequality, and the Political Economy of Hope* by Daniel Greene, which highlights Greene’s argument that even well-intentioned efforts to reduce inequality in a high-tech knowledge economy can lead to deeper issues.

Morris’s review critically examines the “access doctrine,” a concept within education and librarianship behind numerous efforts at improving information literacy, and one that does little-

to-nothing to solve problems like that highlighted by Aslett *et al.* The "access doctrine," as defined by Greene, functions as an explanation of how poverty can be overcome by the individual's study of technology and the development of technical skills as well as the emphasis of these values by educators and public servants" (Morris, 2024, p. 1).

And yet, simply putting technology into people's hands leaves them with only imperfect access to a vast array of information. For one thing, access alone does not necessarily correspond to *equitable access*.

In *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Analysis Tools for Timely Audits: Two Case Studies of Carlsbad Libraries*, Sarah Wilson's original research highlights how access to knowledge must be designed so that biases and hidden prejudicial gates are uncovered and removed, making them diverse, equitable, and inclusive (DEI). DEI is more than ensuring that materials in a library collection have token offerings that match historically marginalized communities: it is about uncovering the needs of the local community, and promoting materials that lead to greater human flourishing.

So, technology access *is* an important equalizer in our world but is not the only component in the puzzle of fostering a just and equitable knowledge economy. Boheme's review highlights Green's argument that the "subsummation of poverty policy by a technology policy ... presumes [that] if the individual gains skills in technology, they can pull themselves out of poverty and find opportunity and economic success" (Morris, 2024, p. 2). This confronts a popular academic consensus on the access doctrine, one that "fits in to the larger, capitalist structure of the United States" (Morris, 2024, p. 1), the myth of the self-made person. Issues like the access doctrine highlight why we need a better ethical framework for a knowledge economy, one that understands the nature of "unethical behaviors based in or characterized by knowledge ... and the harms caused by behaviors that affect knowledge" (Mooradian, 2024, p. 3).

As Mooradian points out, "human beings value knowledge intrinsically and extrinsically while, by virtue of their nature, organizations value knowledge extrinsically only" (Mooradian, 2024, p. 5). This means that organizations value knowledge primarily for its instrumental benefits. They see knowledge as a means to achieve specific goals, like increasing profits, gaining a competitive edge, or solving practical problems. Knowledge is valued not for its inherent worth, but for its potential to generate tangible outcomes. Human beings, on the other hand, carry an innate value of knowledge for its own sake, and find fulfillment in the mere act of learning and understanding information. Think of the joy of reading a captivating book, mastering a new skill, or simply pondering complex ideas. Mooradian's exploration of this raises the important "question of how organizations balance their extrinsic value in human knowledge with its intrinsic value to their human workers" (Mooradian, 2024, p. 6).

Those in the field of LIS, by virtue of their training, have a responsibility to foster an entire *culture* that values knowledge intrinsically, and has the learned skills to comprehend good information from bad. This is a paradigm shift for academia as well: a shift away from the pretensions of an esoteric elite and toward an open conversation embedded with equitable on-ramps for an eclectic chorus of voices.

In Sarah Wilson's diversity audit of two school libraries, the sharp point is made that certain groups of people have a lot more "story representation than others in literature and media" (Wilson, 2024, p. 2). Furthermore, Wilson notes, there were no accessible "peer-reviewed studies of school library collection DEI audits" (Wilson, 2024, p. 8) that they could find during their research into the topic. This emphasizes that those in positions of power within LIS could play a larger role in enhancing DEI efforts. Library journals, for instance, could

enhance the scholarly conversation by putting out "submission call[s] on this topic to see if schools are conducting diversity audits of their materials for empirical research" (Wilson, 2024, p. 8).

Looking forward, as responsible leaders in the LIS field

As the complexities of the information age intensify, skills for deciphering good knowledge from a massive input of information are more important than ever before. As was made clear in the 2023 study *Online Searches to Evaluate Misinformation can Increase its Perceived Veracity*, researchers discovered "consistent evidence that searching online to evaluate news increases belief in true news from low-quality sources" (Aslett et al., p. 1). This means that "people who ... searched to evaluate misinformation were more likely to believe [misinformation]" (Aslett et al., p. 8). This is a problem born out of the abusive design of information search systems (such as Google's search) coupled with a lack of training in how to parse and comprehend information.

The issue of deciphering good information from bad information becomes extremely important as our culture progresses into an era of commonplace generative AI, where the norms of the knowledge economy of the past century come under increasing stress. Old legal and ethical frameworks that suited more disconnected periods in history have been challenged at the most fundamental level by advancing technologies, all the way back to the first privacy regulations in common law, which only came about because of the first handheld Kodak cameras (Lisa, 2019, p. 121).

Drastic changes in technology require new, comprehensive ways of thinking about and understanding our responsibilities to one another. For example, as a leading LIS journal, it became clear through 2023 that the *SRJ* had a responsibility to tackle the issue of AI ethics within the context of an open access, peer-reviewed LIS publication.

The *SRJ*'s own AI Working Group spent the latter half of 2023 contextualizing the rapidly developing field of Artificial Intelligence for both the great boons and grave threats this technology brings to bear. As Mooradian points out, the "ethical issue of automation is based in the potential harms caused to knowledge workers whose work is replaced either in part or entirely" (Mooradian, 2024, p. 5). Those in LIS have a responsibility to take the lead in not only drafting effective responses that can mitigate such harms, but also in actively spearheading the ethical development of those technologies, so that new legal and social structures bind them to serve the social good.

Responsibility to others is the central pillar of the work that myself as editor-in-chief, Marc Hoffeditz as managing editor, and Erica Enos as communications coordinator, have been engaged in since our tenure as the new *SRJ* leadership began. As the only double-blind, peer-reviewed, and open-access LIS journal run entirely by current graduate students, we have a special perspective on the rapidly changing climate of LIS, and we know that by leading from example we provide a guide star for comparator organizations, as well as an unparalleled proving ground for students in the field.

Volume 13, Issue 2 of the *Student Research Journal* comes at an important turning point in the global conversation around information access, economies of knowledge, and ethics of technology. Even as the wider field of academia struggles to adapt to the changing conversation of our times, the *SRJ* continues to lead the charge.

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